



Bridgewater Review

Volume 28 | Issue 1

Article 10

Jun-2009

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Jason Edwards

Bridgewater State College, j3edwards@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation

Edwards, Jason (2009). America's Role in the World. *Bridgewater Review*, 28(1), 19-22.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol28/iss1/10

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America's Role in the World

Jason Edwards



As the United States transitions to the new Obama administration, American foreign policy has a serious debate that is occurring, albeit subtly, among pundits, politicians and policymakers: what should the role of the United States be within the world? In fact, this question has been a bone of contention through the history of American foreign policy, particularly during times of transition such as the end of the Spanish-American War, World War I and II. Today, we are also in a period of transition. America's image has been badly damaged by military missteps in Iraq and Afghanistan, and many write that the United States is on the decline and that it will eventually lose its might, as has every major power has since the beginning of recorded history. What America's role should be is the fundamental question that animates my current research and the subject of this account. In the following paragraphs, I provide a synopsis of that debate, how President Clinton dealt with this subject, and where it might go from here.

During the 1990s, I became fascinated by how the United States would enact its role as world leader without a Soviet enemy. I was particularly interested in how President Clinton managed this new era. I became interested in Clinton because he was a key transition figure as the United States moved from the Cold War to an age of globalization and because of the level of foreign policy activity that occurred during his administration. Yet Clinton would not be able to rely on the rhetorical conventions of the previous era. As a result, I asked how would Clinton rhetorically guide the United States without the luxury of the Cold War? Would the U.S. become more internationalist or retrench and become isolationist? When, where, and why would the United States use force? What would replace containment as America's grand strategy? These questions and others led me to write my recently released book: *Navigating the Post Cold War World: President Clinton's Foreign Policy Rhetoric*. In *Navigating*, I argue that Clinton was able to provide a vision for U.S. foreign policy by modifying and adapting America's foreign policy vocabulary—a set of underlying beliefs, assumptions, ideals, and conventions that all presidents draw upon in their foreign policy rhetoric. What makes each president unique are the specific modifications and contributions made to

this lexicon. These alterations tell us as much about the president as they do about the circumstances he faced in making foreign policy. The modifications made by a president create a rhetorical signature for his presidency and a symbolic legacy in foreign relations that influences future administrations. *Navigating the Post-Cold War World* is my analysis of the rhetorical signature that Clinton created, how he used his discourse to shape and manage this new era of globalization, and the symbolic legacy he left for future administrations.

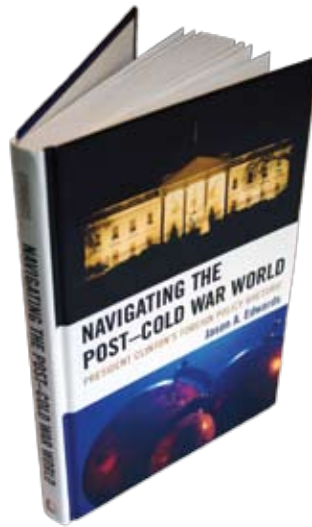
One specific area of analysis was America's role in the world. I dedicate an entire chapter to outlining the various rhetorical strategies that Clinton used to maintain and extend America's role as world leader. What is central to this article and the focus of my current research project is what influences the debate over the U.S. role in foreign relations. In writing *Navigating*, I found that this debate is premised by various strands of American exceptionalism.

American exceptionalism is the distinct belief that the United States is a unique, if not superior, nation that has a special role to play in human history. In his famous treatise, *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville was the first person to reference America as exceptional, but our exceptionalist roots can be traced much earlier to the colonial period. Puritan leader John Winthrop proclaimed that the Massachusetts Bay colony was going to be a "new Israel" that would be a "shining city upon a hill" for the world to emulate. Later, Thomas Paine, writing in *Common Sense*, pronounced that the American colonies had the "power to begin the world over again." This power led many to believe that through America's providential nature, it could escape the trappings of monarchy, a hereditary elite, and other ills that plagued Europe in the late eighteenth century. Eventually, this exceptionalist belief became engrained in American political culture. Today, most public figures find no fault with the idea that the U.S. is not only a unique nation, but larger superior to other states around the world.

Generally, three basic tenets make up Americans' belief that theirs is a chosen nation. First, the United States is a special nation with a special destiny. Second, the

United States is qualitatively different than other nations. Third, exceptionalists believe that the United States can escape the problems that eventually plague all states. Taken together, these exceptionalist tenets function to give Americans order to their vision of the world and their place within it. American exceptionalism largely defines how the United States sees itself within the international order. However, what the United States' specific role should be, how it is enacted, and what activities can be sanctioned to fulfill these exceptional qualities has been a matter of debate for decades. Two distinct traditions of *how* the U.S. fulfills its special destiny have been projected by American politicians. These two traditions are known as the mission of exemplar and the mission of intervention. According to exemplarists, America's role in the world is to stand apart from the rest of the world and serve as a model of social and political responsibility. In order for the United States to fulfill its exceptionalism, it should engage in activities that make itself a beacon for the world to emulate, such as increasing material prosperity, integrating diverse communities into one America and working for more civil rights. Yet exemplarists argue that being a model for the world is a full-time job. Engaging in other activities, such as intervening in the affairs of other states, puts an undue burden on the American people and could risk domestic gains that it has made at home. This basic credo was largely followed by early American political leaders. President George Washington warned the young republic in his Farewell Address to stay away from "permanent alliances" which may stunt its growth. In his first inaugural address, Thomas Jefferson argued that America's foreign policy would be to "seek peace, commerce, and friendship with all, but entangling alliances with none." Secretary of State John Quincy Adams maintained that the United States does not go "abroad in search of monsters to destroy." Rather, it is the "well-wisher of freedom and independence to all." These examples yield the idea that this exemplarist foreign policy tradition has largely been a constraint upon American action, keeping it out of the political affairs of states during the nineteenth century.

On the other side of this debate are proponents of the mission of intervention. Interventionists maintain that America best demonstrates its exceptionalism by active engagement with the world on economic, political, social and cultural terms. These advocates claim that the U.S. cannot stay out of the affairs of other nations and organizations. The world is too integrated, too



interconnected. Rather, America, because of its providential heritage, has a duty and a responsibility to lead the world toward more democracy, more freedom, and more liberty, while defending those who subscribe or attempt to subscribe to similar ideals. Largely, the proponents of this mission have been twentieth-century politicians. In the debate over the fate of the Philippines, President William McKinley argued that America's purpose was to "civilize" the population and "rescue" them from their "savage" nature. On the eve of the U.S. entering World War I, President Wilson argued that the

United States must intervene to make the "world safe for democracy." During his Truman Doctrine address, President Truman stated that the "free peoples of the world look to the United States to help maintain their freedoms." In his inaugural address, President Kennedy promised that the United States "would bear any burden" and "oppose any foe to assure the success of liberty." Ultimately, these examples demonstrate that American politicians have come to argue that it is America's responsibility, as the "leader of the free world," to actively defend and promote the spread of democracy for its own interests and for the international community. America's exceptional heritage is fulfilled by engaging in this interventionist mission.

Over the past one hundred years, exemplarists and interventionists have often been at odds with each other. Each camp has a distinct vision of what the United States should do to best influence the affairs of the world. At times in American history, these visions come into direct conflict. Some of these examples include the imperialism debate during the Spanish American War in the late nineteenth century, the debate over America's inclusion in the League of Nations at the end of World War I, and the debate over whether the United States should actively be in the conflict during World War II. With the end of the Cold War, the debate over America's role in the world exploded again. Exemplarists launched an active media campaign that it was time for the United States to retrench. For example, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick, a staunch cold warrior, advocated that since the United States won the Cold War that it should return to its "normal" foreign policy of nineteenth century exemplarism. During the 1992 presidential campaign, Republican candidate Patrick Buchanan advocated that the United States should discontinue foreign aid, withdraw troops from South Korea and Europe, defund all international organizations, and return to its former policy of no entangling alliances. During that campaign, Buchanan's basic ideal of American retrench-

ment was shared by Democratic presidential candidates, Virginia Governor Douglas Wilder and Iowa Senator Tom Harkin. The views of Kirkpatrick, Buchanan, Wilder, and Harkin caused, according to presidential historian H.W. Brands, a *crisis* in thinking about America's place in the world.

Amidst this post-Cold War crisis, President Clinton articulated his position of what America's role would be. What was unique about Clinton, as I argue in *Navigating*, was that he bridged these diametrically opposed camps by fusing the exemplarist and interventionist narratives together. The president's argument went something like this: the United States must maintain its interventionist leadership role, but he predicated that leadership upon the renewal of its domestic example. By fusing the two narratives together he removed the inherent tension between the two camps and provided a logic for the United States to fulfill its exceptionalist destiny by being strong at home so that it could maintain its global role as world leader.

In fusing these narratives together, President Clinton made specific arguments about fulfilling each mission. For Clinton, fulfilling the mission of exemplar required the United States do three things. First, the president asserted the United States must change the way it thinks about the international environment. Clinton was one of the first political leaders to recognize, get out in front, and talk about the dramatic changes that globalization brought to the lives of people around the world. For Clinton, globalization was an inevitable reality. No country could escape it. The massive changes created both opportunities and challenges. The United States could make globalization its friend or its foe, but if America wanted to win it had to realize that it must adapt, manage, and direct this new era toward American interests. According to Clinton's logic, modifications to this era began with the United States re-establishing itself as an example for the rest of the world.

For Clinton, restoring America's exemplar heritage began with rebuilding its domestic economy. When Clinton entered office, the U.S. was just beginning to recover from the early 1990s recession. However, the president asserted throughout the 1992 presidential campaign and in the early days of his presidency that America's prior generation of political leaders (primarily Republican presidents) had done little to equip the United States to deal with the new realities of the global economy. America had not set out on an aggressive campaign of retooling industries to meet global demand, it had not expanded its trade agreements with other countries, and it had not reeducated its population to learn new skills that could be used in an era of

globalization. As a result, the United States was behind other nations and it was no longer the most dynamic, creative economy in the world. To remedy this situation, the president asserted that the U.S. must get its economic house in order. It must reeducate its population, it must expand its trade agreements, and it must retool the economy for more exports; all of which the administration accomplished in its eight year foreign policy stint.

Evidence of these accomplishments were constantly touted by Clinton: the negotiation of over 300 bilateral and multilateral trade agreements, the creation of 22 million jobs, the expansion of American exports, the general rise of American wages, and the growth in direct foreign investment, along with other economic accomplishments, were proof that the United States's status as an exemplar nation was redeemed. In turn, this evidence positioned to maintain its station of global leadership.

Additionally, President Clinton maintained the United States must improve the overall American community to reaffirm its exemplar status. One of the things that the president consistently highlighted was America's diversity, a diversity in which hundreds of different groups—racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic—live in relative harmony. The ability of diverse populations to live in peace acted as grounds to warrant continued U.S. leadership. The United States acted as a model for other nations with diversity problems. That said, Clinton argued there was room for improvement. The president made racial reconciliation, with his second-term initiative of "One America," the centerpiece of his domestic agenda. He wanted Americans to converse on the subject of race and how it impeded their progress toward a "more perfect union." Although, the president did not succeed with many of his One America initiatives, he moved the debate on race further than had any president for thirty years. Clinton's attempt to deepen our appreciation for diversity positioned the United States as a leader in a multicultural world, renewed its exemplarist role.

While Clinton's discourse in the context of the exemplar mission provided rhetorical grounds to continue U.S. global leadership, he also stated that we would not retreat from our interventionist role as world leader. In



an age of globalism, America was the “indispensable nation” to provide leadership in shaping, managing and directing this new era. In fulfilling the mission of intervention, the president spent most of his time making the case why the U.S. should continue its station as the “indispensable nation.” The case for leadership was contained in two overarching and overlapping claims. The first involved our role as world leader and the legacy of transitional leadership that American generations had shown in the past. In particular, Clinton constantly compared and analogized the U.S. position in the 1990s with that of America in the 1940s. According to the president’s logic, the United States did not shrink from its leadership role in the great transition from World War II and under his leadership it would not shrink from leading the world in transitioning to an age of globalization. By maintaining and expanding its leadership role, the United States continued the legacy of leadership left by America’s “greatest generation.” In doing so, the “globalization generation”—and by extension Clinton—became models for future generations to emulate. By continuing the intervention mission the “globalization generation” had the potential to be as important as the “greatest generation.”

The second claim Clinton made was that U.S. leadership was needed to mold and direct this era toward its interests. Embedded within this argument was a sense of urgency and immediateness. For example, Clinton told a national audience in his 1993 Address to Congress that “if we do not act, the moment will pass and we will lose the best possibilities of our future. We face no imminent threat, but we do have an enemy. The enemy of our time is inaction.” The exigency of Clinton’s presidency demanded American leadership because without it the “moment will pass.” Here, the president implied that the United States would not be beaten by an external threat, but by an internal one: our own inaction and inability to evolve. By not leading, America could not progress. If it could not progress, then it could not fulfill its destiny to influence the affairs of the world. For Clinton, then, it became imperative for the United States to maintain, if not expand, its leadership station to remain the “indispensable nation.” If not, then the country’s exceptional nature was in danger. Maintaining the interventionist mission was imperative for the Clinton administration.

Since President Clinton left office a number of happenings have damaged America’s position as world leader. Military missteps in Iraq and Afghanistan, abuse at Abu Ghraib, detainees at Guantanamo Bay, the USA Patriot Act, wiretapping of American citizens and other problems have only fed the fire against America’s exceptionalist interventionism and its exceptionalism in general. Ever since President Bush decided to enter Iraq in March of 2003, left-leaning foreign policy critics, such as Noam

Chomsky and Chalmers Johnson, have argued that the United States is pursuing a drastic militaristic form of interventionism that has it dangerously close to becoming an empire. On top of that, there are a growing number of conservatives who excoriate this militaristic exceptionalism. Texas Representative Ron Paul, a 2008 candidate for president, advocates the United States abandon its role as an interventionist state and return to a “normal” foreign policy. Johns Hopkins University Professor, Francis Fukuyama, a prominent neo-conservative, one-time proponent of the Iraq War and devoted interventionist, asserts that the United States must return to using unobtrusive strategies such as free trade and commerce, à la Washington and Jefferson, to resuscitate its image and its leadership role. Boston University Professor Andrew Bacevich has long been a critic of our current U.S. interventionist role. In his new book, *The Limits of American Exceptionalism*, Bacevich maintains that our current international position is not sustainable. The missteps in Iraq and Afghanistan, the billions of dollars in trade deficits, and the constant promotion of Western-style democracy, has created a crisis in American life that may do irrevocable damage to its prestige and the power of its example. These criticisms point to a much larger foreign policy conversation that rages among America’s foreign policy intelligentsia.

It is here where I situate my current research interests. My current research project is to trace and analyze various enactments of this current debate. For example, in his inaugural address, President Obama committed the United States to maintaining and resuscitating its leadership position. He proclaimed that America is ready and has a responsibility to lead. At the same time, he indicated he wanted to usher in a new era of engagement with various regions of the globe, such as the Muslim world, based on mutual interests and mutual respect. How does this “new era” differ from previous administrations, such as Clinton? What adaptations will President Obama’s administration make in the current rhetoric regarding our role in the world, our exceptionalist heritage and America’s foreign policy vocabulary? What are the limits of America’s station in international affairs? How will others, such as Ron Paul, challenge these exceptionalist positions? At the moment, I don’t have answers to these questions. Ultimately, however, my book and my current research project aim to help others understand the roots of our current foreign policy debates, where they have taken us in the past, and where they will take us in the future. Understanding these positions and debates are absolutely essential for the health of U.S. foreign policy and American democracy.

—Jason Edwards is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies.